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ABSTRACT

This study examined the feasibility of a parent-toddler reading program offered as a community-based intervention in one urban and one rural community with widespread poverty and low educational attainment. Fifty-eight families including 61 children, most of whom were 2 or 3 years of age, participated. During the intervention, parents learned an interactive style of reading with their children. Through interviews and pre- and post-intervention assessments, the study measured the parents' interest in the program, determined if the program actually increased home literacy, and if the child's language skills were improved. Results indicated that the program was welcomed by both communities in which it was offered. Following the intervention, parents reported that their children enjoyed reading more and read more on a regular basis. The parents also reported that their child's cognitive and linguistic skills had improved. The study offered suggestions to adapt this reading program to other areas. (Includes a sample of the questionnaires used to poll the parents and a copy of a blank certificate of excellence for participating children. Contains 73 references.) (DCP)

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

"YOU KNOW, I THINK MY BOY'S GONNA BE A READER!"

Supporting School Readiness Through Community-Based Intervention

Colleen E. Morisset

Report No. 37 / April 1997

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Supporting School Readiness Through Community-Based Intervention

Colleen E. Morisset
University of Washington and ZERO TO THREE/NCCIP

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

Abstract

This study examined the feasibility of a parent-toddler reading program offered as a community-based intervention in one urban and one rural community with widespread poverty and low educational attainment. Specific aims of the study were to (1) ascertain parents' interest in the reading program, (2) test whether the program increased home literacy activities, and (3) whether it improved children's language skill.

Fifty-eight families including a total of sixty-one children participated in this research. The majority of children were two or three years old at entry to the study. Parents were interviewed prior to the intervention about their child's home literacy experiences and spoken language skills. During the intervention, parents learned an interactive style of reading with their children. Within approximately one month of program completion, parents completed a second set of interviews and provided feedback about aspects of the program they liked, did not like, and whether they planned to continue the reading techniques in the future.

The program was enthusiastically embraced by parents in both communities. In addition, the program increased the frequency of reading. Following the intervention, parents indicated that more children enjoyed reading, and more were read to on a regular basis. They also commented that the program improved their children's cognitive (e.g., memory) and linguistic skills. These benefits were evident in both communities despite considerable differences in geographical location, ethnic make-up, parents' marital status, and family income.

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Introduction

Despite the national goal that "by the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn" (Goals 2000: Educate American Act, 1994), an alarming number of our nation's children are *not* prepared for academic lessons when they start school. This situation is not likely to reverse in just a few short years. The reasons are complex. Increasingly more parents spend less time with their children in the preschool lessons that promote caring, curiosity, creativity, persistence, and pride, due in part to greater numbers of single, disengaged, unemployed, and under-employed parents. When social and economic circumstances provide few opportunities for feeling supported, successful, and competent, parents are less able to cope with their own lives or provide socially and emotionally for their children (Barnard, Morisset, & Spieker, 1993; Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Evans, 1992; McLoyd, 1990; Ramey & Ramey, 1990; Schor, 1995). The cumulative effect of unremitting social and economic distress is reflected in a less stimulating, less responsive and more punitive parenting style that is more common among lower-income parents and parents who are young, less educated, and raising their children alone (Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; Culp, Culp, Osofsky, & Osofsky, 1991; Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1994; Haskins, 1986; Hashima & Amato, 1994; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; McLoyd, 1990).

A second impediment to parents' ability to carry out traditional child-rearing functions relates to recent changes in the labor market that require more time in the workforce for both single and married parents to support their families. One result has been a new "poverty of time" (Fuchs, 1988). Lack of time impedes all parents' ability to provide for the instrumental, emotional, and educational needs of their children. Working parents, but especially working-poor parents who can't afford to purchase material resources and help with basic household chores, are short on time for their families (Smith, 1989).

In 1994 over 15 million American children lived below the poverty line. This included 5.6 million children living in poverty despite the fact that one or both parents worked 50 or more weeks that year at full- or part-time jobs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count, 1996). Given the hardship of poverty and the accompanying social and personal stresses experienced by many poor parents, it is not surprising that their children are less likely to be ready for kindergarten, more likely to fall behind in grade school, and more likely to drop out of high school (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Krein & Beller, 1988; Hare & Castenell, 1985; Schweinhart, 1994; Zill, Collins, West, & Hausken, 1995).

The economic conditions that led to a steady increase in the number of working poor families, including an additional 1.3 million new working poor families since 1989, show no

signs of sudden reversal (Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count, 1996). Thus, while we advocate for the economic and social policy changes necessary for longterm change, we must acknowledge that the problems of too little time for parenting and too little money for adequate child care are daily realities for millions of American families. As interventionists and in program planning, we must be ready to function within the constraints of limited time and limited money. In short, we must work smarter on behalf of families and young children. To do so requires that we articulate the models and assumptions that support our intervention efforts and then evaluate our programs and practices with scientific rigor. To do less shows little value for the time and trust of families we "serve" (Morisset, 1996).

No single intervention will ameliorate the monumental stresses faced by poor families with young children. The diversity of families' needs and resources must be a major determinant of the timing, intensity, and duration of supportive services. With regard to educational intervention programs, some children — for instance, those of mothers with limited intellectual abilities — respond favorably to intensive, continuous, targeted educational interventions (Ramey & Ramey, 1990). Other families whose children are at less risk of cognitive delay can benefit from relatively less intensive pre-kindergarten programs, including Head Start (Barnett, 1995; Schweinhart, 1994). In addition to child-focused center-based programs, family support programs that deliver services to parents in their homes can also have positive effects on opportunities for children's learning and the quality of parent-child interaction (Yoshikawa, 1994).

As these illustrations suggest, preventive interventions vary in both scope and intensity. One way of categorizing interventions, advanced by Gordon (1983), differentiates programs in terms of characteristics of the participants, or "targets" of the intervention. *Universal* prevention efforts attempt to avert problems before they begin. Such programs, like water fluoridation and childhood immunization, are population-based efforts that provide widespread benefit to many and carry risks to few. The practice of providing services to select individuals whose characteristics place them at greater risk for developing potential problems, but where problems are not yet evident, are considered *selected* prevention efforts. An educational intervention for children at risk for developmental delay due to mothers' mild mental retardation illustrates a selected intervention effort. Finally, *indicated* programs treat problems once they have occurred. Indicated programs are considered preventive in nature when they can slow the exacerbation of the present problem or the manifestation of further aspects of the problem. Special education programs for children with severe behavior problems or for children who are emotionally disturbed are examples of indicated programs; such interventions

can be considered preventative insomuch as they slow the progression to even more debilitating conditions.

This report describes an attempt to foster preschool readiness through community-based universal intervention. The first section is a review of the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of a recent innovation in family-based preschool intervention: parent-child book reading. Following that, a study is described that tested the feasibility of a specific parent-child book sharing intervention in two socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Finally, factors related to the program's success and suggestions for improving implementation are presented.

Book Sharing and Children's Language Learning

Empirical studies of parent-child interaction suggest many ways in which the early social environment can offer direct support for the task of language learning. In addition to adults' encouragement of frequent and reciprocal verbal exchanges, observations of parent-child interaction during games and routine events suggest that, at least in middle-class families, parents take advantage of many opportunities to teach language directly (Ninio & Bruner, 1978; Ninio, 1980a; Murphy, 1978; Messer, 1978). Observational studies of parent-child picture book reading describe many explicit and implicit parenting behaviors that appear to facilitate language acquisition: the use of what- when- where- why-type questions, direct labeling, fine-tuning utterances to the child's level of "meaning," and providing corrective, informative feedback (Demetras, Post, & Snow, 1986; Moerk, 1974, 1976; Nelson, 1973; Newport, Gleitman, & Gleitman, 1977).

Additional studies have shown that picture book reading in the home is correlated with preschool language ability (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992; Mason, 1980; Rowe, 1991), emergent literacy, and reading achievement (Bus-Adriana, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). For example, Wells (1985) reported that the frequency of listening to stories in the home, at ages 1 to 3 years, was significantly associated with children's literacy scores and teacher ratings of children's oral language skill at ages 5 and 7 years.

The extent to which book-reading affords children an opportunity to practice burgeoning language skills depends largely on the discourse style of the adult conversational partner. In a study of middle-class families, Wheeler (1983) identified developmentally sensitive changes in parent-child discourse from ages one to four years. As would be expected, labeling routines directed by relatively concrete questions (e.g., "what's the name of that?")

were more characteristic at the younger ages, while at the older ages, mothers tended to ask more open-ended questions that went beyond the immediate scope of the book (e.g., "do you think George will get in trouble?").

Social Status Differences in Picture Book Reading

Group comparisons of book reading based on family social status (SES) reveal both individual and group differences in reading frequency and mothers' discourse style and suggest that these differences may have important implications for children's learning (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995). For example, Ninio (1980) proposed that the teaching style more typical of lower socioeconomic status (SES) mothers may be adequate for very early lexical development but might not facilitate subsequent, more complex language developments. Additionally, Blank (1975) suggests that the deficits in reading and school performance more common among lower-SES preschool-age children may be due to limited experiences at home with open-ended questions such as *why*, *how*, and *when*. Both Ninio's and Blank's positions suggest intriguing foci for intervention research.

Dialogic Reading: A Promising Parent-Child Intervention

In review, descriptive and correlational studies suggest that book reading can be a powerful context for children's language learning, at least among children from homes where adults' reading and parent-child reading appear to be relatively common and valued activities. Both longitudinal studies and between-group comparisons have identified important individual differences in parents' behavior during book sharing and indicate many ways in which adults' discourse style during book sharing could facilitate vocabulary and grammatical development. Until recently however, empirical proof of this association has been missing. Now, causal links between aspects of mother-child discourse during book reading and children's vocabulary and grammatical skills have been demonstrated (Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, Fischel, DeBaryshe, Valdez-Menchaca, & Caulfield, 1988).

Whitehurst's first study, in Stony Brook, New York, tested a four-week intervention program designed to alter the frequency and timing of parents' speech during storytime. Parents in the experimental group received less than one hour of instruction in techniques that encouraged the child's active participation, including the use of recasts and expansions, and in ways to make progressive changes in their interactive style as their child matured. Control families also read to their children but did not receive any instruction. At the outset of the

study, the children ranged in age from 21 to 35 months. They scored in the normal range on the Denver Developmental Screening Test and on a language screening instrument. The experimental and control groups did not differ in frequency of book reading in the home or on an observational measure of the complexity of children's expressive language (mean length of utterance: MLU).

During treatment, parent-child reading sessions in the home were audiotaped three to four times per week. The experimental and control groups' reading styles differed in the following ways. Parents in the experimental group were more likely to repeat their children's utterances; parents in the control group used more yes/no questions and directives, and were more likely to read the text without inviting the child's participation. During reading, children in the experimental group used more multi-word utterances and had a higher MLU. At the end of treatment, children in the experimental group outscored those in the control group on tests of verbal expression and receptive language, and on observed MLU. At follow-up, nine months later, treatment effects were still apparent in tests of expressive language; the experimental group continued to outscore the control group by an average of 6 months.

Similar results were obtained by Valdez-Manchaca with a group of working-class poor Mexican children in daycare centers in Tepic, Mexico (Valdez-Manchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). In this study, the intervention consisted of 30 reading sessions (10 to 12 minutes in length) conducted every weekday during the child's preschool schedule. As in the original Whitehurst study, there were significant treatment effects on all posttest measures. Compared to control group children (who participated in a special play activity equal to the treatment condition in frequency and duration), those in the book reading group made an average 7.3 to 8.2-month gain in expressive vocabulary and an average 3.3-month gain in receptive vocabulary in just six weeks.

Dialogic Reading: Community-Based Language Intervention for Toddlers

The utility of dialogic reading as a community-based universal intervention was demonstrated in a randomized controlled trial in Seattle, Washington. The SPARK (Seattle's Parents Are Reading to Kids! Morisset, 1994) study included 129 two-year-olds and their parents and took place in four branches of the Seattle Public Libraries. Parent-training was provided over a six-week period to small groups of parents by children's librarians. Two training sessions took place, in the first and fourth weeks of the six-week intervention period. The intervention was contrasted with a comparison condition in which parents also met twice with children's librarians and were encouraged to read frequently with their toddlers. All

aspects of the treatment and comparison programs were identical except, for parents in the treatment group, parent sessions focused on the "new" dialogic style of reading with children.

The results of the SPARK study showed that the intervention was effective in bolstering the early language learning environment of participating toddlers. Analysis of audiotaped reading sessions showed that, following the training sessions, parents in the intervention were significantly more likely to use a conversational style during reading. They asked more questions, provided more expansions and repetitions, and gave more praise. In turn, children in the intervention group used more one-word and multi-word utterances during reading (Morisset, 1993). Finally, compared with children in the intervention, children in the comparison condition were two to three times more likely to show lags in expressive and receptive skills one month following the intervention phase. This pattern of results was still evident at a three-month follow-up testing (Morisset, 1994). The results of the Seattle study are impressive because most of the participants were middle-income parents who began the program with a strong tradition of family reading. That the intervention could enhance the abilities of these relatively skilled children testifies to the potency of the reading techniques.

This unintended design "strength," however, limits the generalizability of the Seattle findings to other less-advantaged communities. In Seattle, it was difficult to recruit and maintain the participation of lower-income study families whose children were at greatest environmental risk for language problems. Analysis of subject recruitment by recruiting method yielded an important lesson — high-risk families require more intensive intervention, beginning pre-intervention with one-to-one recruitment. Socio-demographic factors and self-identified parenting stress were also associated with parents' noncompliance during the intervention period. Parents with few social resources had difficulty incorporating regular reading and occasional trips to their neighborhood library into their family routines. Perhaps for some, nonparticipation reflected the relative unimportance of literacy compared to their more pressing family problems (Gadsden, 1995).

The purpose of the present study was to learn whether the dialogic reading intervention could be adapted to communities in which many children are at risk for language delay and for future difficulty in school because of widespread poverty and many parents' lack of formal schooling. The primary questions were: 1) Can the intervention be integrated with existing family support services, specifically a peer home-visiting program or an Even Start adult literacy program? 2) Are the reading techniques appropriate for families and toddlers at risk for language delay due to severe socioeconomic disadvantage?

Methods

Sample

Two communities, represented by local family resource centers' governing councils, choose to participate in the study after reviewing a description of the reading intervention, study methods, and expectations of community participants. The participating communities, North Lawndale (Chicago, Illinois) and Fremont County (Colorado), self-selected from a six-community case study of child and family service systems conducted by ZERO TO THREE (View & Amos, 1994). All six communities were originally selected by ZERO TO THREE because they exemplified positive, progressive approaches to services for families with infants and young children. The opportunity to work cooperatively with ZERO TO THREE allowed the current project to further established relationships with two very different communities, and it provided a rich understanding of community demographics, services, and delivery systems.

Table 1. Community Descriptions

Fremont County, Colorado	
Location:	Rural county in south-central Colorado
Population:	32,000 people in 1,500 square miles
Largest minority group:	13% Hispanic
High School graduates:	84%
Unemployment:	9%
Birthrate among women < 18 years:	10 per 1,000/year
Poverty:	16% below FPL
North Lawndale, Chicago, Illinois	
Location:	Urban community on west side of Chicago
Population:	47,000 people in 3.0-mile radius
Largest minority group:	96% Black
High School graduates:	36%
Unemployment:	23%
Birthrate among women < 18 years:	29 per 1,000/year
Poverty:	40% below FPL

At the outset of the ZERO TO THREE study, both North Lawndale and Fremont County met several selection criteria: universal access to services, mainstreamed non-categorical settings, linkages across a range of levels of care and service system needs, professional development opportunities, commitment to family support and leadership, and state financial support and encouragement. Although rich in terms of vision, compassion, outreach, and leadership, both communities are economically impoverished. The following

community profiles, presented in alphabetical order below, were abstracted from the Final Report of the ZERO TO THREE project (View & Amos, 1994). A socio-demographic overview of each community is provided in Table 1.

Each community received $3,000 to compensate for extra staff time required to complete the current parent-child reading study. The governing councils, with family resource center staff input, chose how to spend the money. The North Lawndale center, Family Focus Lawndale, purchased cellular telephones and air time for their home-visiting teams' use. As described below, North Lawndale is a very poor, often violent area of Chicago, Illinois. The telephones were a welcome safety measure. In Lawndale, the remaining funds were spent on a "graduation" celebration for study parents, children, their other family members, and the reading program staff.

In Fremont County, approximately one-third of the staff fund was used to hire a part-time project coordinator. The coordinator took responsibility for all aspects of the intervention including recruiting, parent training, and data collection. One-half of the total fund was used to establish two parent-child book nooks, one at the Fremont Family Center and another in the children's section of the Fremont County Library. The remaining money went toward additional staff training and supplies to continue the program beyond the study period.

Fremont County

Fremont County is a rural community in south central Colorado. The county encompasses approximately 1,500 square miles and has a population of about 32,000 people, including 2,142 children under five years of age (1990 census). Approximately half the county's population resides in Canon City. The poverty and unemployment rates in 1990 were higher in Fremont County than for the state as a whole. Many Fremont County families receive Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) — both never-married mothers and families who are temporarily supported due to periods of unemployment. The number of families on AFDC is increasing. The area was originally a coal mining area; currently the major employers are the state and federal prison systems. Medium-sized businesses are leaving the county, and it is difficult to find a job that pays more than minimum wage. The teenage pregnancy rate is slightly less than for the state as a whole; 5.1 percent of 333 live births in 1991 were to teenage mothers, 10-17 years of age. In contrast, compared to the state as a whole, the county has a relatively high percentage of low-birth-weight infants. Residents of Fremont County are predominately Caucasian, non-Latino in ethnicity.

Services for infants and toddlers in Fremont County are coordinated by Project Echo (Early Childhood Health/Education Outreach). Project Echo is an outgrowth of a federally-funded initiative which, in 1976, sought communities interested in establishing an interagency initiative to promote coordination of services for young children with handicapping conditions. Initial alliances were formed among traditional sources of state funds for social services to the county health department, Developmental Disabilities, Department of Education, Medicaid, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and more recently, a substance abuse grant. With the advent of P.L. 99-456, the State Department of Education, Colorado's lead agency for Part H, began to support local interagency collaboration and currently provides funding for a Project Echo Coordinator and for strategic planning. One key policy is that the "Project Echo Interagency Council will not assume the role of an agency but will plan, promote, evaluate, support, and coordinate community-based service."

The current service system has multiple components. Parents who participated in the reading research project were drawn from Project Echo's Family Center parent-child programs, the local Even Start adult literacy program, the Passport Program (a parent-held child health passport program that registers all babies born in the county), from parents' responses to an informational poster, and word of mouth.

North Lawndale

North Lawndale is a community that encompasses two census tracts on the west side of Chicago. Approximately 45,000 residents live within its 3.0-mile radius. North Lawndale is the ninth poorest of Chicago's 77 communities. In 1989, nearly two-thirds of Lawndale children ages three to five lived in poverty. Former major employers such as Sears Roebuck and Co. and Western Electric have left the area and Lawndale's streets are lined with boarded-up and burned-out shops and housing. The rate of violent crime is more than double that of Chicago as a whole. Unemployment is at 23 percent, and many are under-employed in low-wage jobs.

Approximately 30 percent of all births in the community are to teen mothers. Twenty-five percent of residents 16 to 19 years of age are neither in school nor have graduated from high school. In 1990 it was estimated that only one-third of students in Lawndale would graduate from high school. The ethnic make-up of the community is predominantly (96%) African American.

Services for infants, toddlers, and their families in Lawndale are coordinated primarily by Family Focus Lawndale, in collaboration with the Westside Association for Community Action. Family Focus Lawndale is one of five community-based centers operated by Family Focus, Inc., a leader in the creation of resource and drop-in centers for families. The collaboration with the Westside Association of Community Action (WACA) is an important one. Established to promote communication and coordination of services among agencies, community organization, and local government, WACA has played a powerful leadership role in Lawndale since 1971. WACA is trusted to maintain community control over the design and operation of social service programs offered by "outsiders."

During 1990, Family Focus Lawndale served over 1,000 families and over 400 children ages birth to three. Services for families and young children include a wide range of center-, school-, home-, and community-based prevention and intervention services and programs. Home visits, provided by "peer advocates," are an essential component of three programs: Parents Too Soon, targeting parenting and non-parenting pre-teens and teens; the Prevention Initiative Project, a comprehensive infant-toddler development program funded by the Illinois State Board of Education; and Project Success, a pilot program funded by the Governor's Office that uses schools as the focal point for the coordination of community and state services to help children deal with family and health problems that could interfere with their education.

Lawndale parents who participated in this study were associated with one of the three Family Focus home-visiting service programs described above. A few study participants were peer advocates themselves; most were parents receiving Family Focus services.

Recruitment

Recruitment to the study took place through the family centers of Fremont County and North Lawndale. The program was open to all parents of two- and three-year-old children. Thus, within each service area, the intervention was "universal" in scope. This decision was based primarily on each community's insistence that the program be promoted as a special opportunity for all families and not a stigmatized remedial program for families and children "at risk." Extra effort was made to include parents who, due to limited economic and educational resources, might be less likely to read with their children on a regular basis, as well children observed to be slow in language acquisition. In addition, a few families with children outside the preferred age range were included at the request of parents and program staff who felt they would benefit from the reading program.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of SPARK Participants

Socio-Demographics	Fremont M (SD) or %	Lawndale M (SD) or %
Mother's age (years)	28.3 (4.6)	25.6 (7.1)
Teen at first birth	20%	52%
Mother's education (years)	12.5 (2.5)	11.4 (1.4)
Not a high school graduate	32%	53%
Mother's race/ethnicity		
Black, not Hispanic	0%	100%
Hispanic	12%	0%
White, not Hispanic	88%	0%
Marital status (single)	20%	88%
Family income		
Receiving government assistance	20%	79%
Below federal poverty level	40%	94%
Household size (adults & children)	4.5 (1.6)	4.3 (1.5)
SPARK Child's age (months)	30.1 (5.2)	31.6 (7.2)
< 2 years old	3%	0%
2 years old	62%	80%
3 years old	35%	14%
4 years old	0%	6%
Child's sex (male)	39%	51%
Birth order (first born)	35%	29%

Note: Fremont sample included 26 children from 25 families; Lawndale sample included 35 children from 33 families.

Participants

Study participants included a total of 61 children and their families: 26 children from 25 different families in Fremont County, and 35 children from 33 different families in North Lawndale. Socio-demographic characteristics of participating families are provided in Table 2. Recruiting methods were successful in attracting a wide range of parents — many teens, parents who had not completed high school, and families living in poverty. Families in North Lawndale experienced a relatively greater degree of socioeconomic hardship: 52% were teens at the birth of their first baby, 53% had not completed high school, 88% were single parents, and 94% lived below the annual (1995) federal poverty level. All participating Lawndale mothers were African American. In Fremont County, 88% of study mothers were

White, not Hispanic, and 12% were Spanish-speaking Hispanic mothers. In Fremont County, 20% were teen parents, 32% had not graduated high school, 20% were single parents, and 40% lived below the poverty level. In each site, the study sample was more extreme in terms of socioeconomic risk than the overall community profile (recall Table 1).

Table 2 also provides basic information about the study children. As intended, the majority were 2 or 3 years of age. This was true of 97% of children in the Fremont sample, and 94% of children in the Lawndale sample. In Fremont, only 39% of the sample were boys; the ratio of boys to girls was about even in the Lawndale sample (51% boys). Roughly one-third of each sample was first-born children.

Procedures

The Reading Techniques

The aim of the intervention was to teach parents how to modify their reading style to enhance their young children's language development. In essence, parents learned to guide children's verbal participation during book reading through the use of specific conversational devices such as frequent "what," "where," and "why" questions, open-ended questions, corrective feedback, and praise. The intervention, based on the dialogic reading program for toddlers developed by Whitehurst et al. (1988), consists of two one-hour parent-training sessions that occur approximately three weeks apart.

In the present study, paraprofessionals were taught to conduct the parent-training sessions by the study investigator, who received her training from the developers of the dialogic reading program. The parent training combines modeling and direct instruction with role play and corrective feedback. Training begins with a video demonstration of specific reading techniques. In session one, parents are shown how to use evocative techniques such as direct questions to facilitate vocabulary development. In the second session, parents are shown how to use verbal expansions of child utterances and open-ended questions to help children build more sophisticated sentence-level skills.

The parent-training video provides real-life examples of each reading technique, followed by interactive stop-action segments that ask "what could this parent have done differently?" or "what else could this mother have done?" The video is complemented by one-to-one training in the form of role-play. First, the trainer begins reinforcing the video vignettes by modeling the parent's role as reader. Then the trainer takes the child's role, giving each

parent an opportunity to practice the new techniques and receive corrective feedback. Parents receive a single-page review of the reading techniques presented in each assignment and are asked to use this new way of reading with their children at least once a day for approximately ten minutes over the course of the intervention.

Community Adaptations

In the original Whitehurst study (Whitehurst et al., 1988), the parent training sessions were conducted one-to-one. For purposes of the present study, the format was modified to accommodate small groups of parents as well as individuals. When groups met, they viewed the video and then broke into pairs for the one-to-one training and corrective feedback. All parent-training sessions ended with a question and answer period and a summary of goals for that phase of the intervention. All parents received reminder sheets for their use at home, reading logs to keep track of their home reading sessions, and a magnet so they could display the reading logs in a prominent place, such as the refrigerator. Most parents spent three weeks working with each set of reading techniques. However, when family obligations conflicted or parents requested that their child was ready to go on, the increments were shortened to two-week intervals.

Other community adaptations were made with respect to the strengths and hazards of the individual sites. As mentioned, paraprofessionals were responsible for recruitment and parent training within each community. In Fremont County, a rural community with no public transportation, the majority of families, including three enrolled in Even Start's family literacy program, received the instruction in their homes. Four additional Even Start parents participated in parent training as part of their center-based Even Start literacy classes. A local mother with two preschool children was hired and trained to conduct the intervention. Recruitment took the form of informational posters, announcements in the newspaper, and word of mouth. A total of 25 parents participated in the Fremont program, which was offered four different times over a period of ten months.

In contrast, in Lawndale, a densely-populated inner-city neighborhood, all 33 parents began the intervention within the same month. To accomplish this, parents met in small groups on several different days at the family resource center. Child care was provided on site. The parent-training sessions were conducted by pairs of staff members who worked for the family center regularly as paid parent advocates. A total of nine staff members received training in dialogic reading. Lawndale study families were drawn primarily from the staff's existing case loads. Posttest data were collected as part of their regularly scheduled home visits.

In both Fremont and Lawndale, parents received three children's books over the course of the study: one book at each of the two parent-training sessions and a third book at the posttest visit. In addition, parents who completed both training sessions received a "certificate of excellence" (see Appendix C).

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection was organized in two time periods: pretest (or baseline) and posttest. To facilitate parent and staff cooperation with the study protocol, primary data collection was kept to a minimum. Where possible, and with parents' consent, routine information such as marital status and family size was obtained from existing family center files. Information about children's shared reading experiences, literacy activities, and language skills was obtained through face-to-face interviews with parents or through self-administered written questionnaires. Parent satisfaction was ascertained in the posttest interview from a series of open-ended questions. Each type of data will be discussed in turn. Samples of the pre- and posttests questionnaires are provided as Appendices A and B, but copyrighted material is not included.

Socio-demographics. Information about mother's age, education, marital status, income, and household composition was abstracted from family center records at baseline. Father's age and education was also ascertained if the father was living in the child's home. Information about household composition included the number of adults in the home and their relation to the study child, the number of children less than 18 years in the home, children's ages and their relation to the study child, and parity (first or later born) of the study child. Additional information was collected about family ethnicity and what languages, other than English, were spoken in the home.

Children's interest in books and reading was assessed via pre- and posttest parent interviews. Parents were asked specifically about the child's reading exposure: the age at which the parent began reading with her child, who reads to the child, how frequently, and whether the child enjoys being read to (Whitehurst, 1991). The item, "Things Your Child Likes to Do," was added based on the work of Needleman (Needleman, Fried, Morely, Taylor, & Zuckerman, 1991). This is an open-ended question that asks parents to name their child's three favorite activities. In this study, parents' responses were scored "yes" or "no" based on whether reading was among the three items named. Finally, to reflect the community-based context of this study, parents were asked about visits to their public library and to publicly-held children's storytimes.

Assessments of children's language abilities. Two methods that are relatively brief and straightforward were used to collect pre- and posttest information about expressive language skill. The first occurred as part of the interview: Parents were asked to recall the three longest sentences, or phrases, they had heard their child say. Phrase length is considered a rough proxy of grammatical skill because, in the early stages of multi-word speech, increasing length is one sign of increasing syntactic maturity. The average length of the child's longest three phrases was computed based on the number of grammatical units (morphemes) and based on words. Relatively few children had more morphemes than words. To minimize the potential inclusion of data-recording errors, average length of utterance based on words was chosen for analyses discussed in this report.

Following the interview, parents were asked to complete the MacArthur Short Form Vocabulary Checklist: Level II (CDI/SF II; Developmental Psychology Lab, 1993). The CDI/SF II is a parent-report inventory of vocabulary words typically said by children in the age range of 16 through 30 months. Parents are asked to indicate which of 100 words they have heard their child say, and whether or not their child has begun to combine words (e.g., "more juice"). The CDI/SF II toddler version is available in two parallel forms (Form A and Form B). The inventory can be completed in less than 10 minutes by most literate parents or, as an alternative, it can be read aloud. In the present study, parent preference determined the method of administration. Parents who were obviously capable readers and grew impatient with the interview format, e.g., by reading ahead over the interviewer's shoulder, had the option of completing written portions on their own.

The CDI/SF is intended to identify, through parent report, children's developmental maturity in expressive language skill, including changes over time due to intervention effects. In addition, by designating the 50th percentile as the average number of words typically endorsed for children at monthly age increments, CDI/SF norms can be used to estimate age equivalents for developmentally-delayed children whose chronological ages are beyond the specified age ranges (Fenson, Pethnick, & Cox, 1994). It was for these reasons – brevity, availability of pre- and posttest forms, low respondent burden, and the potential to interpret the vocabulary skill of delayed children, that the CDI/SF was chosen for this study. At the outset of the study, the CDI/SF norming study and tests of comparability of Forms A and B were still underway. Just recently, comparison data based on approximately 1200 relatively middle-class infants and toddlers became available but, at the time of this writing, published norms and guidelines for interpreting the CDI/SF were not yet available (Fenson, 1966).

Parent satisfaction. As part of the posttest interview, parents were asked about their and their children's experience in the intervention program. The open-ended questions that

guided the interview were: what did you especially like, what didn't you like, what was useful to you, and is there anything you'd like to change. Parents were also asked if they would continue to read "this way" in the future, and to recommend a few enjoyable children's books to other parents of toddlers (see Appendix B for a copy of the questions). As before, parents could respond to the questions verbally or in writing.

Table 3. Child's Reading Exposure and Language Skills at Intake

	Fremont		Lawndale	
	M (SD) or %	Range	M (SD) or %	Range
Child's Home Reading Experiences				
Parent began reading to child (in mos)	8.7 (3.8)	1 - 15	9.9 (6.5)	0 - 24
Parent read to child last week (yes)	92%		87%	
Parent read to child 5+ times last week	8%		28%	
Many (11+) children's books in home	85%		47%	
Child looks at books on his/her own	96%		97%	
Child likes or "loves" reading	77%		62%	
Reading is among top 3 favorite activities	12%		13%	
Child has ever been to public library	38%		36%	
Attended library or storytime last week	27%		23%	
Expressive Language Skill (CDI/SF)				
Vocab. total is at or above avg. for age	14%		13%	
Vocab. total is 1 to 3 months below avg.	19%		13%	
Vocab. total is 4+ months below avg.	67%		74%	
Combines words in conversation "often"	73%		70%	
Combines words "sometimes"	23%		27%	
"Not yet" combining words	4%		3%	
Avg. length of longest 3 phrases in words	3.3 (1.1)	1 - 6	4.8 (1.6)	1 - 8

Note: Statistics reflect the maximum sample size. Fremont sample sizes ranged from 23 (for the CDI/SF Vocab.) to 26; Lawndale sample sizes ranged from 23 (for the CDI/SF Vocab.) to 30.

Children's Reading Exposure and Language Skills at Baseline

Reading exposure. At the baseline interview most parents described books and reading as present in their homes (see Table 3). For example, in both Fremont and Lawndale, the majority said they began reading to their child before 12 months of age (63% and 59%; average

age 8.7 months and 9.9 months, respectively) and all reported reading with their child at least once in the prior week. Children's books were currently available in all but one home. Most families had at least five children's books. Relative to Lawndale families, proportionately more of the Fremont families had many (eleven or more) children's books. At baseline, virtually all parents had observed their young children looking at books and two-thirds or more said their child "liked" or "loved" reading.

Despite positive descriptions of their home environment, and of their child's past experience with books, few parents reported many current literacy activities. Eight percent of Fremont children and 28% of Lawndale children had been read to frequently, five or more times, in the prior week. Reading was mentioned among the favorite activities of only one in eight children (approximately 13%). Few children (one-third) had ever been to the public library, and just one-quarter had attended an out-of-home literacy event (e.g., a storytime at the family center, or a visit to the children's section of the public library) in the previous week.

Association between reading exposure and family characteristics. The availability of books and reading activities were related to baseline family characteristics in some interesting ways. Geographic location was associated with only one exposure variable, the number of children's books in the home. Fremont families reported owning more books, probably reflecting the lesser degree of poverty in Fremont compared with the Lawndale sample. Within each of the two communities, a greater number of children's books was associated with mothers who were married, high school graduates, and with families supported by wages rather than government assistance.

In Fremont County, mothers who reported reading with their children in infancy (less than one year old) were better educated, had fewer children living at home, and were more likely to be in the intervention with their firstborn child. There were no significant relations between family background characteristics and initiation of reading among the Lawndale families. Like Fremont families, approximately 60% reported reading with their children since infancy.

The relation between recent reading and family characteristics was somewhat surprising. In both communities, there was a negative association with marital status and income — married mothers were less likely to have read frequently (five or more times) in the past week with their children. This finding is interesting and most likely illustrates a new type of poverty — a poverty of *time* — among the working poor. Most, but not all, married mothers in the samples worked outside the home; all married mothers' families were supported by wages rather than government assistance, and all were above the federal poverty level.

Marital status and source of income were not related to past or current literacy events outside the home. Instead, library use was significantly related to mothers' age at first birth. Compared with teen mothers, mothers who were at least 18 years old at first birth were three times more likely to have visited the library "ever" with their children (Relative Risk = 3.54; X^2=7.58; $p < .01$). In addition, mothers with education beyond high school were significantly more likely to have attended the library or a children's story hour in the previous week (Relative Risk = 2.53; $p < .05$ by Fisher's Exact). Mothers' age and education were also related to whether reading was listed as a favorite activity (a relatively rare occurrence at baseline), but the pattern differed in the two communities. In Lawndale, four mothers listed reading as one of their child's favorite activities. As might be expected, all mothers were older and all were high school graduates. In Fremont however, three mothers listed reading as one of their child's favorite activities and all three were teen mothers who had not completed high school.

Expressive language skill. The average age of children in the Fremont and Lawndale samples at baseline differed only by six weeks, with Lawndale children being somewhat older. Of the combined group, only 25 children were of chronological ages appropriate for the CDI/SF II parent inventory and its vocabulary percentile scoring (16 through 30 months). Because scores of many more children, 44 total, could be interpreted based on age equivalents, the CDI/SF II vocabulary scores will be discussed in terms of language age equivalents rather than percentile ranks.

Relatively few study children earned CDI/SF II vocabulary scores comparable to those of children in the sample provided by Fenson (1996), a sample of markedly higher socioeconomic status. Three Fremont County children scored at or above age level; four scored one to three months below age level, and the remaining 14 children (67%) scored four or more months below age level. In Lawndale, three of 23 children scored at or above age level; three scored one to three months below age level, and 17 (74%) scored four or more months below age level (see Table 3). Among the children who were ahead of their age-mates, one child was ahead by six months, and the others were ahead by no more than three months. There was much greater range among children who scored below age level. Seven of these children scored greater than 12 months below age level; three in Fremont County and four in Lawndale.

A similar gap between vocabulary scores of children from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged homes has been identified for the longer version of the Communicative Development Inventory as well (Arriaga, Fenson, & Cronan, 1996). These findings raise important questions about the origin and onset of socioeconomic group differences in early language abilities, the validity of written self-report methods with less well-educated parents, and relevance of middle-class norms for children of lower

socioeconomic status. Until these questions are explored further, CDI/SF data on children from families of lower socioeconomic status must be interpreted with caution.

An alternative way to make use of the CDI/SF data collected in the present study capitalizes on salient, well-established markers of potential language delay. Among children 24 months of age, these include an expressive vocabulary of less than 50 words or no combinatorial speech (Morisset & Lines, 1994; Thal & Bates, 1989).

In this study, 47 children were 24 months or older at the time of the baseline CDI/SF. Nine of them were combining words only "sometimes," and one, "not at all." Eleven of the 47 children had vocabulary scores less than 50. They ranged in age from 25 months (a child with a score of 3 words) to 39 months (a child with a score of 36 words). Five children showed both signs of potential delay — not combining "often" and a vocabulary score of less than 50. Children in this subset were considerably older than the 24-month threshold; their ages ranged from 27 to 35 months. Admittedly, some children may have had words that aren't included in the CDI/SF list of 100; however, the fact that 34% of the sample (16 of 47 children) can be identified as "worrisome" by this crude yet conservative screening for developmental delay attests to the high risk nature of the study sample overall.

As shown in Table 3, parents' examples of their children's longest sentences and phrases were consonant with their report of limited vocabulary size. Among Fremont children, the average length of the longest three phrases (MLU-3) was 3.3 words (SD = 1.1; range 1 to 6). Among Lawndale children, the average was 4.8 (SD = 1.6; range 1 to 8). Few children's scores increased when MLU-3 was computed based on morphemes, and of those that did increase, the gain was less than one point. MLU-3 comparison data, based on norms established for the long form of the CDI (Fenson, Dale, Reznick, Thal, Bates, Hartung, Pethick, & Reilly, 1991), indicate that the average MLU-3 score of children ages 26 months and above is at least 6.0. Although this estimate reflects mean length of utterance in morphemes, rather than words, it supports the conclusion that the combinatorial skills of most children in the present study were also well below those of their middle-class peers.

Even Start families. Seven children of parents involved in Fremont County's Even Start program participated in the study. Inspection of this subgroup's scores revealed marked similarity with the sample as a whole and thus subsequent analyses were conducted for the combined group. There were, however, three interesting differences between Even Start families and the other Fremont County participants. First, proportionately fewer Even Start parents reported reading to their children in infancy. Thirty-three percent said they read with their child before the age of 12 months, whereas early reading was reported by 72% of the

other Fremont participants. Second, fewer Even Start parents said their child had ever been to a public library (29% vs. 42%).

Despite these differences, proportionately more Even Start families reported more current home reading. Among the Even Start families, 66% read with their children three or more times a week; among the other Fremont families, only 40% read this often. This difference may reflect Even Start parents' self-identified interests in and efforts toward their own and their families' literacy. Similar to other children in the Fremont sample, Even Start program children also ranged in vocabulary total. Two were at or above age level, and three were four or more months below age level. Two other children, ages 31 and 36 months, scored beyond the age equivalencies provided by the CDI/SF II norms.

Results

Pre- to Posttest Changes in Children's Reading Exposure and Language Skills

Following the intervention period, parents completed CDI/SF II, Form B, and were asked a subset of the structured questions about books and reading that they had answered at baseline. Quantitative analysis of their responses focused on those variables most likely to reflect differences in parents' attitudes and behaviors: parents' perceptions of the child's enjoyment of reading, frequency of in-home shared reading, and frequency of out-of-home literacy activities. Other variables were excluded from the analyses if virtually all participants showed the behavior at baseline (e.g., child looks at books on his/her own) or if improvement could reflect nothing more than passive participation. For example, the number of children's books in the home was expected to increase over the course of the study because each family received three children's books as a consequence of participation.

Because the data from Fremont and Lawndale were similar at baseline and posttest, the sites were combined for the purpose of statistical analysis. Doing so increased the total sample size and thus the statistical power of detecting pre- to posttest differences. The results of the statistical analyses for the combined group are presented in Table 4. Parents' responses to the posttest questionnaire indicated two important changes: more children enjoyed reading and were read to more often.

Following the intervention, more parents in Fremont County and in Lawndale included reading among their children's top three favorite activities. For the combined group, the

percentage who listed reading as a favorite activity increased from 14 percent at baseline to 39 percent at posttest ($X^2 = 6.86$; $p < .01$, Table 4). Reading enjoyment was also assessed directly by the question "If your child was read to, how much did your child enjoy it?" Relative to baseline, more children in both communities were described as liking reading "a lot" or "loves it." In addition, the number of children who were read to frequently more than doubled. The proportion to read frequently (five or more times in the previous week) increased from 16 percent at baseline to 47 percent at posttest ($X^2 = 8.47$; $p < .01$, Table 4). When asked, all parents said that they planned to continue reading "this way" with their children. In contrast to these substantial changes in in-home experiences, changes in the frequency of out-of-home literacy activities — e.g., visits to the library or family center story:imes — were not apparent (data not tabled).

Table 4. Changes in Child's Reading Exposure and Language Skills

	Fremont		Lawndale		Fremont & Lawndale Combined				
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	n	X^2	sig
Child's Home Reading Experiences									
Reading is a favorite activity	12%	50%	16%	28%	14%	39%	51	6.86	**
Child like or "loves reading	77%	85%	63%	88%	70%	86%	50	4.9	**
Was read to 5 or more times last week	8%	40%	26%	53%	16%	47%	43	8.47	**
Expressive Language Skill (CDI/SF)									
Combines words in conversation "often"	73%	77%	68%	80%	71%	78%	51	1.50	ns
Avg. length of longest 3 phrases in words	3.3	3.4	4.9	5.9	4.1	4.7	51	a	**

Note: Statistics reflect the subsets for whom both pre- and posttest information were available. Fremont sample sizes ranged from 24 (for the CDI/SF) to 26; Lawndale sample sizes ranged from 16 (for the CDI/SF) to 25. Tests of paired proportions for the combined sites were based on McNemar's test; the test statistic is a modification of Chi Square (see Altman, 1991).

[a] The test of difference in sentence length was based on a paired t-test; $t(50) = 2.70$.

* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$

In this study it was difficult to assess change in child vocabulary with the CDI/SF II because many children grew beyond the age range and language age equivalencies provided by the comparison data. Recall that at baseline most children were already beyond the age level of the tests. In addition to having even fewer children within the age range of the norms at posttest, it was not possible to interpret change scores based on age equivalency, because age

equivalency scores do not conform to a known mathematical distribution. For these reasons, posttest CDI/SF II word counts will not be discussed further.

At posttest, slightly more children were reportedly combining words "often." Improvement was most evident in the length of children's spoken phrases. The average length of the longest three sentences and phrases increased from baseline to posttest, particularly for children in the Lawndale sample (Table 4).

The findings regarding expressive language skill must be interpreted cautiously, because combinatorial speech generally improves in the toddler years as a result of increased linguistic maturity. Without the availability of a no-treatment comparison group, it is not possible to ascribe expressive language gains to the intervention. This is probably less true of the reading exposure variables. It seems unlikely that reading pleasure or reading frequency would spontaneously burgeon during a two-month period in the toddler years. The fact that other literacy-type activities such as trips to the library and storytimes did not increase over the study period further supports the likelihood that the changes in parent-child reading were due to the intervention itself.

Further Examination of Stability and Change in Home Reading Experiences

Additional analyses were conducted to understand more about families who benefitted from the intervention. The first step was to identify families in which children's home reading experiences improved, remained unchanged, or apparently worsened over the intervention period. This approach, to examine potential unintended negative consequences directly, is often overlooked in intervention research. In the current study, the analysis revealed little reason for serious concern. A total of eight children's scores on one, and only one, of the three reading outcome variables declined from baseline to posttest. The most common change for the worse was the elimination of reading on the list of favorite activities. This was true of four children who otherwise gained or maintained their enjoyment of reading. In three of the four cases, reading as a favorite activity was supplanted by outdoor activities: "basketball," "bike riding," and "go outside." Thus the change is probably best explained by concomitant changes in the weather from early to late spring. In two other cases, reading frequency diminished from more than five to less than five times per week. It is not obvious why this was so. Indicators of these children's enjoyment and their parents' comments about the reading program were positive. Finally, one 20-month-old boy reportedly enjoyed reading less at posttest than at baseline. Interestingly, this child and his 39-month-old sister were both participants in the intervention.

At baseline, their mother reported that they both "loved" reading. However, at posttest, she described her son as liking it "pretty much" and her daughter as continuing to "love" it. It is possible that the intervention helped this mother become more aware of differences between her children.

The second step in this analysis was to compare two other groups, those who improved with those who stayed low in terms of home reading experiences. The purpose of this analysis was to determine if intake family or child characteristics could distinguish those who benefitted from those who were apparently unchanged by the intervention. The goal was to understand more about the generalizability of the findings.

Potential predictors of interest were those easily ascertained at intake to this, and presumably other, intervention programs. They included seven characteristics of the family: the site (Fremont or Lawndale), whether the mother was a teen at her first birth, whether or not the mother completed high school, the mother's marital status, total number of children in the home, source of family income (government assistance or wages), and whether the family was above or below the federal poverty level. In addition, four characteristics of the child were considered: child's age at intake, sex, parity (first or later born) and whether or not the child was combining words "often."

The two outcomes that showed greatest change were examined: reading frequency and reading as a favorite activity. Among families with pre- and posttest data, 36 children (84%) were read to infrequently at baseline. Of these, 42 percent improved over time, 58 percent did not. Similarly, 44 of those with pre- and posttest data did not include reading as a favorite activity at baseline (86%). Of these, 33 percent improved, 53 percent did not.

A series of chi-square tests were used to examine the association between intake characteristics and improvement over time. All but one test failed to reach statistical significance, at alpha less than .05. Because so many tests were conducted (22 total), even this one finding may be spurious. The finding was that among children who were read to infrequently at baseline, parents of girls, more often than boys, increased reading frequency by posttest ($X^2 = 10.08$, $p < .01$). By and large, intake characteristics did not predict improvement. Conversely, a more useful interpretation of these null results is that improvement seems equally likely for families who differ on various indicators of low socioeconomic status.

Parent Satisfaction

The final segment of the posttest interview asked parents general questions about the program — things they liked and things they would like to change. After the posttest data were collected, all parents' comments were read, sorted, and grouped by several themes that emerged (see Table 5). This qualitative assessment of program effects, in the parents' own words, provided rich supplementary information to the questionnaire data summarized above.

On the whole, parents' responses were overwhelmingly positive. The most frequent comment was that they liked the time they spent reading with their children; they enjoyed the physical closeness and the positive involvement. Comments that represent this category of responses include: "(I liked) the time we spent together, we don't do that all the time," and "(I especially liked) holding my baby while reading to him."

The second most frequent positive comment was that parents liked the intervention because it motivated their child's learning or directly helped the child learn new things. For instance, one mother commented: "It was very interesting, she kind of took over, asking to be read to." Others said "(It was useful because) it helped her memory," and "I especially like when my son brings the book for me to read every day." Some comments referred to children's learning new vocabulary and language skills, such as: "(It was useful because) he pronounces words better," "The way I read to him, it causes him to talk more," and "It helped my daughter learn more words." Other comments were specific to the dialogic reading intervention techniques, such as: "The program taught me that it's okay not to finish reading the book because this gives the child a chance to ask questions."

An unintended but welcome benefit of the intervention was its apparent effect on other family members. Several parents offered comments such as: "This encouraged my (older) five-year-old to read to her sister with my assistance," "It got my husband involved as well," and "It encouraged more reading and more talking." Still others appreciated the children's books they received: "(I liked) my daughter getting the book. She likes to read."

Parents were also asked about aspects of the program they didn't like or would like to change. The most common feedback in this category was that they "could have used more books." A few also admitted that the new conversational reading style was unfamiliar and sometimes conflicted with their "old" reading style. Three parents admitted that it was "difficult to change my old reading style." The most common reason was "I'm used to asking all the questions and doing all the reading."

Table 5. Parent Feedback at Posttest

	Fremont	Lawndale
What did you especially like or find useful?		
The extra time I spent with my child	72%	54%
Helped my child's learning (e.g., memory)	68%	61%
Helped my child talk often, more clearly, or better	56%	18%
Influenced other family members' reading to child	16%	4%
Gift of children's books	28%	21%
What didn't you like or would like to change?		
I could have used more children's books	4%	11%
It was difficult to change my old reading style	8%	4%
Will you continue to read this way?		
Yes, Yes! and Yes, definitely	100%	100%

Note: Summary of answers given by parents are grouped by theme. Data reflect feedback from 25 Fremont parents and 28 Lawndale parents.

Through discussions with parents about their child's language and home activities, the intervention created an awareness about children's language skills and about toddlers' interest in books and reading. It also asked parents to change existing habits. Specifically, parents were asked to look at books frequently (daily) with their toddlers, to read in a new way, follow their child's interest in the story, and praise their child's talk about the book. Change, even positive change, can be stressful. Along this line, one parent lamented "that's all she (my daughter) wanted to do!" Another mother's comment: "I wish the program would continue," is a potent reminder that applied research can influence participants and communities, well beyond the limited period of data collection.

Discussion

Benefits of the Intervention

The results of this small field study suggest that the dialogic intervention can enhance early reading experiences, including the experiences of young children at greatest risk of school failure. Whether these changes in family practices will lead to eventual school readiness, particularly in literacy-related knowledge and reading readiness, is beyond the scope of this

study. Two other desirable outcomes, conceivably fostered by shared reading, and perhaps more developmentally appropriate to the two- and three-year-olds of this study, were identified: the intervention increased the frequency of home reading and increased the parents' perception of their children's enjoyment of shared reading.

For the subset of families for whom both pre- and posttest data were available, the proportion of children in Fremont who were read to five or more times in the previous week increased from 8% (baseline) to 40%. In Lawndale, the proportion doubled, from 26 to 53%. Thus, following the intervention, many children were read to *more* often, and *as* often as more socioeconomically advantaged preschoolers, who are reportedly read to 4.5 to 10.5 times per week (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Parents in this study also reported that proportionately more children enjoyed being read to. This is not to say all children enjoyed reading; some did not. At baseline, 11% were reported to like reading "a little" — the lowest intensity response for that item. In another study of preschoolers, Wells (1985) also found that about 11% of the children enjoyed reading "not at all," or "not much." The effect of the intervention on increasing children's enjoyment of reading was not universal, but it was dramatic. Following the intervention, there were still two children (3%) who enjoyed reading only "a little."

The potency of this intervention for many of the families derives from the provision of simple joint activity — book reading — and a manner of reading that is developmentally appropriate to the needs of both young preschoolers and parents of young preschoolers (Morisset, 1996). Two lines of reasoning suggest this is so. First, shared book reading offers parents and children an intimate and pleasurable opportunity to strengthen their emotional ties. Evidence of the rich affective dimensions of shared book reading have been identified by Bus and van IJzendoorn (1988, 1995) who observe that the interactions of securely attached dyads tend to be more sensitive to the child's needs and less negative, controlling, and inattentive than those of insecure dyads.

The second line of reasoning reflects the premiere developmental changes of the early preschool years. Simultaneous with the opportunity for emotional closeness, book reading provides a context for the preschool child and parent to negotiate the child's budding independence and urgent need to "do it myself." This quality is particularly true in dialogic reading interactions because the techniques specifically instruct parents to let the child set the pace, take the lead in telling the story and in turning the pages. Whether dialogic reading would be an effective therapeutic intervention for conflicted or avoidant mother-toddler pairs is a fascinating question for future research.

It is tempting to discount the finding that 100% of parents' said they would continue using the dialogic reading method in the future. To the extent they do continue, it is likely that these reasons — the opportunity for emotional closeness, the chance to "catch the young preschooler doing something right," and the fact that even parents with low reading skills feel comfortable with the conversational methods of dialogic reading — will be involved. It seems likely that a habit of pleasurable shared reading, a habit more common in socioeconomically advantaged than in disadvantaged families, could lead even very young preschoolers and parents toward more literacy activities in the years to come. A case example of this possibility was provided earlier in the words of one Lawndale mother who exclaimed: "You know, I think my son's gonna be a reader!"

Cautions and Limitations

Several potential limitations of this study must be addressed before concluding in favor of the intervention, and particularly in favor of dialogic reading as the cause of program benefits. First, because the program was voluntary, and no comparison condition was included in the study design, it is possible that parents attracted to the intervention were those parents more likely to carry out program requirements. Without random selection and use of a comparison condition, or repeated observations of parent-child reading, we have no way of knowing if the strength of the intervention was overestimated because of possible favorable pre-intervention characteristics of the parents. While the design does limit the generalizability of the study findings, the characteristics of participating families described a group slightly less advantaged than the community as a whole and, compared with middle-class studies of preschoolers' reading, a group for whom reading was not a frequent activity. For these reasons, it seems that the findings are relevant to other at-risk families within these and other equally diverse high-risk communities.

A second caution also addresses the magnitude of the intervention effects. In this study, it was not possible to know if parents' responses were honest reflections of their home reading practices or if they were biased to meet the expectations of the program staff or social desirability. Two arguments against this possibility are germane. One is that there remained considerable variability in parents' responses even at posttest. The second argument draws on the relation between the families and the interventionists. In most cases, the people involved had long-standing and trusting relationships in which parents felt comfortable being honest about choices and life experiences that were much more private than the content of the present study.

The third caution pertains to the dialogic method itself. In this study it is not possible to separate out potential effects of the provision of books and encouragement of shared reading from effects specific to the intervention techniques. Anecdotal evidence suggests there was something special about dialogic reading for the parents; many said they were relieved at not having to do "all the reading," and they enjoyed watching and helping their child's growing language facilities. Moreover, recall that at baseline the majority of parents said they had read with the child in the past, had noticed their child's interest in books, and had children's books in their home. It seems that the dialogic method showed parents how to optimize resources and interests that were already available, and do so in a way that was pleasurable for both the child and parent.

This observation may be especially relevant for families who lack a surplus of time. Recall that in this study, the mothers who reported owning more children's books were more likely to be high school graduates and more often supported their families through wages rather than government assistance. Surprisingly, these same indices of relative socioeconomic advantage were related to *less* frequent parent-child reading at baseline. It seems plausible that the better-educated mothers valued children's books and reading, but because they tended to work outside the home, had less time to read with their children. As national efforts to move families from welfare to work gain momentum, it becomes paramount that our recommendations to parents about ways they can help foster school readiness are realistic as well as potent.

Keys to Successful Adaptation

A hallmark of successful adaptation is when a new program loses its identity as "new" and program ownership moves from "theirs" to "ours." Elements that contributed to this program's successful adaptation to Fremont County and Lawndale are summarized below.

1. Building on pre-existing relationships between the communities and "ZERO TO THREE" gave this research effort credence and acceptability up front. The fact that the investigator was known indirectly to leaders in both communities through participation in a common organization helped established a sense of mutual respect and trust that otherwise could have taken many months to build.

2. Extensive informal but informative face-to-face interaction among the researcher, parents, and community players fostered caring and respectful professional relationships. A result was that mutually-agreed upon responsibilities and expectations were established *before* the outset of the actual field activities.

3. Universal access and the use of peers as parent trainers contributed to community perception of the program as a valuable and positive parent-child activity. In several cases, parent trainers were also parent participants.

4. Ample technical support and supplies were provided to each site to ease the integration of the program into existing services, and to increase the likelihood that the program would continue in the future.

5. The specific intervention techniques expanded strengths, rather than correcting "bad" parenting practices, and thus were well-received and fun for parents and children. Because this style of reading is conversational, flexible, enjoyable, and can be initiated by adults *or* children, it seems more likely that families will continue reading well beyond the designated study period.

In conclusion, the benefits of this intervention derive from its ability to help parents conceptualize books as "objects of reciprocal interaction which result in pleasure" (Pawl, 1987). For many parents, especially parents who lack time or have difficulty reading, this intervention helped the unfamiliar, the daunting, become the familiar, imbued with pleasure and caring they feel for their children. It helped parents provide a new and safe context for their children's independence and learning, and engendered shared pride in these very accomplishments. These experiences are the foundations of school readiness.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Family Focus Lawndale Sparks Families' Reading

Permission for Release of Information

Yes, I'm interested in participating in the SPARK reading program!

As part of the project, we are asking your permission to learn about your family from your Family Focus Lawndale folder. With your permission, your home visitor will copy information you have provided about your (and your partner or spouse's) age and education, your marital status, family size, children's ages, and family income. This information will help us know what types of families are interested in programs such as SPARK, and who we are missing. Your names will not be written on any material so there will be no way to identify you or your child from the family background form or the questionnaires you fill out. When the findings from this project are published, there will be no way to identify them with any particular child or family.

Yes, I give my permission for SPARK research staff to copy family background information from my Family Focus Lawndale folder. I understand this information, as well as the answers to all questionnaires I complete as part of this project, will be kept confidential and anonymous.

_____ _____

Parent's Signature Date

Overview and Contact Information

The SPARK reading program takes 7 weeks to complete. You will meet with your home visitor three times over the course of the project. At the first meeting, held at the Family Center, you will fill out this packet of questionnaires, learn the first set of reading tips, and receive a children's book that is yours to keep. We will ask you to practice the reading tips with your child at home, 5 - 10 minutes a day, for 3 weeks. At the end of the 3 weeks you will meet at the Family Center again, learn the second set of reading tips, and receive another children's book. Again, we will ask you to try the new reading tips at home for another 3 weeks. At the end of this time, you will meet with your home visitor at your home, fill out a second packet of questionnaires, tell us what you and your child thought of the program, and receive a third children's book as a thank-you gift.

Feel free to contact your home visitor (by phone or in person) to talk about how the reading program is working. You may have questions about the reading tips, need extra reminder sheets, want to talk about how to fit the program into your family's schedule, or how to make it more fun for you and your child. Your home visitor will answer all these questions, and more. She can also tell you about other children's books that work well with the program and about the book-lending library at the Family Focus Lawndale Family Center.

Appendix B

Parent Questionnaires

Things Your Child Likes To Do

Please list three of your child's favorite things to do (for example, watch television, play outside, help you with chores, color).

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Your Child's Language

Please list the three longest phrases or sentences you have heard your child say.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Your Child's Interest in Books and Reading

Do you read to your child? yes ___ no ___ If yes,

At what age did you start reading to your child? ___ months

Is your child read to by other people? yes ___ no ___ If yes,

How many times per week? 1-2 ___ 3-5 ___ 5-7 ___ 7+ ___

If your child is read to, how much does your child enjoy it (circle)?

1 = a little 2 = pretty much 3 = very much 4 = loves it

Does your child look at books by him/herself? yes ___ no ___

How many children's books do you own? 0 ___ 1-2 ___ 3-5 ___ 5-10 ___ 11+___

Have you and your child ever visited the Public Library together? yes ___ no ___

Thinking back over the past week (7days)...

Have you had a chance to read with your child? yes ___ no ___ If yes,

How many times? 1-2 ___ 3-5 ___ 5-7 ___ 7+ ___

Did you and your child go to a storytime or check-out library books? yes ___ no ___

Things Your Child Likes To Do

Please list three of your child's favorite things to do (for example, watch television, play outside, help you with chores, color).

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Your Child's Language

Please list the three longest phrases or sentences you have heard your child say.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Your Child's Interest in Books and Reading

Thinking back over the past week (7 days)...

Have you had a chance to read with your child? yes ___ no ___ If yes,

How many times? 1-2 ___ 3-5 ___ 5-7 ___ 7+ ___

Was your child read to by other people? yes ___ no ___ If yes,

How many times? 1-2 ___ 3-5 ___ 5-7 ___ 7+ ___

If your child is read to, how much did your child enjoy it (circle)?

1 = a little 2 = pretty much 3 = very much 4 = loves it

Did your child look at books by him/herself? yes ___ no ___

How many children's books do you own? 0 ___ 1-2 ___ 3-5 ___ 5-10 ___ 11+___

Did you and your child go to a storytime or check-out library books? yes ___ no ___

Your Comments About This Project

We're interested in your thoughts about this reading program. Please jot down a couple of thoughts about what you and your child have gained by participating in SPARK. This doesn't have to be long, just a few words is fine.

What did you especially like?

What didn't you like?

What was useful to you?

Will you continue to read in this way in the future?

Is there anything you'd like to change?

What books did you and your child enjoy that you would recommend to other parents of toddlers?

THANK YOU FOR HELPING US LEARN MORE ABOUT FAMILIES' AND TODDLERS' READING.

Appendix C

Certificate of Completion

CERTIFICATE OF EXCELLENCE

awarded to

_____

for outstanding parenting achievement to help your child develop language skills, and for your ongoing commitment to "spark" your toddler's interest in books and reading.
Congratulations for completing the
Family Focus Lawndale SPARKS Families' Reading Program.

SPARK Project Director Date

Director, Family Focus Lawndale Date